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County official breaks budget news on Twitter

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Instead of calling a press conference, this executive announces budget shortfalls via tweets

When [Ron Sims](#), the elected executive of King County, Wash., started using the “microblogging” service [Twitter](#) last summer, the feedback from residents and the media was pretty enthusiastic.

“My county exec is on Twitter. [Ron Sims] gets it,” said one fellow Twitter user.

“I think it’s great Sims is using Twitter,” posted “Mark” in response to a *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* [blog story](#) about Sims. “It’s one more (effective) way to connect.”

In September 2008, when it came time to get the word out about a larger-than-expected shortfall in the county budget, Sims could have called a press conference—but instead, he got on Twitter.

“Just revised King County’s budget shortfall from 86 to 90 million dollars. Inflation and a sluggish economy are reducing revenue growth,” Sims tweeted.

This novel approach to communications won plenty of notice from the mainstream media as well as local bloggers.

The reactions to Sims’ foray into social media (he’s also got a [blog](#) and a [Facebook](#) page) highlight the challenges faced by communicators who assist and manage elected officials and other high-profile people who stray beyond press conferences and press releases.



"One of the King County attorneys told us we were in uncharted territory," explains Carolyn Duncan, Sims' communications director. "We were going along gingerly."

Duncan and her colleagues had put their heads together in mid-2008 to come up with a social-media strategy.

"The goal is to reach more residents—especially those that tend to be younger, or less likely to get their news and information from mainstream media or government Web sites," explains Natasha Jones, deputy communications director for Sims.

They were fortunate to work for a county executive who was enthusiastic about nontraditional ways of talking to constituents. One of Sims' children had used Facebook to successfully advertise an event, and Sims saw Facebook's potential value for raising his profile in King County, of which Seattle is the primary city.

The communications team had also started uploading photos to [Flickr](#), the photo-sharing Web site, as an alternative to merely posting photos on the executive office's Web site.

The team figured Twitter would be a good stepping-stone, and Sims began tweeting from his BlackBerry—sending short updates about taking rides on his bike, bad calls at Washington Huskies games and, most prominently, the budget shortfall.

Reuters picked up the story that Sims had used this vehicle to announce the news, rather than sending out the usual press release. Other local media outlets followed up on the news, and the *Post-Intelligencer* ran a piece solely about Sims' adventures on Twitter.

Sims' tweeting may have goaded some journalists into jumping on the social-media bandwagon themselves, explains Duncan.

"I got one ominous message from a reporter saying that he needed to talk to me," she recalls, assuming that the reporter was about to break some damaging story. "Instead he asked if I could help set him up on Twitter."

In the past several months, Duncan and her team have broadened their Twitter reach by setting up an account just for [county news](#), including changes in bus services, updates on recent flooding problems and county election alerts.

As more county employees dabble in social media, the team has also seen the need for dos and don'ts for the staff.

"Our guidelines are still being drafted, and they'll be reviewed by our County Prosecuting Attorney's office," Jones explains. "In the meantime, we've asked that common courtesy and standard workplace rules apply. So far, people have lived up to our best hopes in nearly every instance."

Since Sims' Twittering has boosted the transparency of his office, residents and the media have responded in kind, engaging in the kind of dialogue that social media can foster.

Earlier this year, the *Seattle Times* reported that Sims pulled down a Twitter post pointing to an editorial in the *Post-Intelligencer* about county elections. (Local election officials thought it looked like Sims was making a subtle endorsement of a candidate; Duncan told the *Times* that Sims merely wanted to alert voters to the election deadline.)

In an uncertain media environment (there's talk of the *Post-Intelligencer* closing this year), Jones says Twitter and other social media tools can help local governments stay in touch with journalists who move on, often to blog on their own, or with other media outlets.

"It's been helping us build up relationships outside of the newspapers," says Jones of the connections to journalists on Twitter and Facebook.

What's in the social media future for Ron Sims?

He's been nominated by President Obama as deputy secretary of Housing and Urban Development, and is awaiting Senate confirmation for the post, so he may be leaving behind his established Twitter and Facebook communities.

"They know I Twitter and they know I Facebook," Sims told [KUOW radio](#). "So it's gonna be really interesting to see what the rules are. They may say to me 'no Twitter' and then I wouldn't ... It'll be up to the White House and it'll be up to Secretary [Shaun] Donovan about their comfort zones with my Twittering and my Facebook."